



Profiling our most promising business leaders

Contract for success

For Certes' Mainquist, finding work-life balance means being human first

BY ANNA PRATT

Special to Finance and Commerce

Sally Mainquist, who serves as the president and CEO of the Golden Valley-based Certes Financial Pros, a senior-level staffing firm that stresses work and life balance, says that achieving success means being human first.

She believes in hard work and empowering others, inside and outside of the office, a lesson that she owes to her rich experience.

"You can get things done through people, by getting them engaged and feeling good about their work," said Mainquist, who has worked her way up since starting out as director of client services in 1999.

Part of what she believes makes her an effective leader is that she understands that "the best ideas don't have to come from me. People want to help the company be successful. I like to hire people who are smarter than me," she said.

As an illustration of that philosophy, during Mainquist's tenure Certes has expanded from a modest, family-owned business to a \$20 million enterprise. Her impressive client portfolio includes many of the state's leading companies. Additionally, last year she headed up the sale of Certes to the national firm, Staffing Now, Inc., which will hopefully recreate its model elsewhere, she said.

The company provides its clients with contract and full-time finance and accounting professionals to help out with increased workloads, budget demands, stakeholder expectations or other staffing issues. While striving to meet its clients' needs, Certes' mission is to enable its contractors, all financial profes-

sionals, to have more control over their lives.

Certes promotes taking care of the family first. One way it does so is by offering flexible work hours. Another perk to the job is that contractors can take advantage of one of the company's vacation homes. The way Mainquist sees it is, "You don't have to be in office all the time. A lot of things can be done over the phone, on the computer or even at the cabin. People are paid by the hour," she said.

The human touch

It's a credit to Mainquist's leadership that Certes contractors stay on for an average of four years. Further, a number of them move on to permanent positions with the company's clients. The formula works, Mainquist says, because she keeps in close contact with its pool of nearly 200 contractors, most usually working off-site. Workers, she says, are rewarded for doing a good job. For example, she calls contractors to thank them on the anniversary of their start date each year. Mainquist also tries to help contractors become acquainted with each other, by hosting occasional happy hours at her house and other fun events.

Mainquist believes in building relationships with clients, too, instead of cold calling. Working hand-in-hand with clients has many rewards. "We say we're a bridge to a better life. At any time, a client can become a contractor and vice versa," she said. "Contractors are our salespeople — do a good job and the word spreads."

As with the contractors Mainquist oversees, Certes has provided the balance she was looking for when she arrived to the firm years ago. She had already



acquired plenty of experience in auditing at KPMG's Minneapolis office; she spent 20 years in finance and operational leadership roles. She found Certes because her husband, whom she met at KPMG, was one of the then-start-up company's first customers. Mainquist says she has been able to be there for her family. Over the years, she attended all of their soccer games along with other school activities. Now, years later, she's still happy in her job.

"I can't believe I get paid to do this," she said, adding, "I've been on the other side of the desk. I like working with people and helping others with work-life balance."

Under-promise and over-deliver

Having hit her stride, Mainquist's extracurricular activities reflect her desire to help others discover job satisfaction. Mainquist has started several networking groups that assist both seasoned professionals those who are just entering the field. She's a Financial Executives International strategic partner, sits on a CEO roundtable and is a past mentor for the University of Minnesota's Carlson School

of Management and Mentium 100. Additionally, she volunteers with a nonprofit organization called First Impressions, helping disadvantaged women look their best for job interviews.

Even in the current economy, she believes that others can luck out the way she has. However, she acknowledges that there are many challenges. Companies are shutting down, taking a "deer in headlights," stance, as she put it. They're afraid to make any bold moves. In the meantime, Certes has tried to pick up the slack, by offering classes in resume writing and using LinkedIn social networking. Securing additional clients, while also managing their expectations, means communicating and being honest, Mainquist said, explaining, "You can't sugarcoat things. You have to tell the truth and make decisions. ... I don't like to promise something that can't be done. Under-promise and over-deliver."

Right now, she's trying to stay positive. She's confident that when the economy does bounce back, financial minds will be in high demand. "I think accounting is one of the best fields to be in," she said.